

# NO TIME FRAME YET ON REFUGEE REPATRIATION

**B**angladesh says Myanmar has not yet given them a 'definite time frame' on taking back Rohingya refugees. Officials who accompanied Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal to Nay Pyi Taw this week told Mizzima the two countries have agreed to stop the flow of refugees to Bangladesh from Myanmar's Rakhine state. A senior official in Naypyitaw was quoted by Dhaka Tribune as saying that Bangladesh and Myanmar have discussed repatriation of the refugees but did not reach an agreement. Both countries, however, have agreed to halt the mass exodus of Rohingya to Bangladesh and restore stability in Rakhine state to facilitate the repatriation. Myanmar Foreign Ministry's Permanent Secretary U Kyaw Zeya told reporters in Naypyitaw on Tuesday

that they would go "step by step" on the repatriation issue although Dhaka wanted it to start as soon as possible. He said the neighbours would form a joint working group for repatriation. Myanmar Home Minister Lt Gen Kyaw Swe and his Bangladeshi counterpart Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal met on Tuesday. The two countries signed two agreements on security and border cooperation. Home Ministry's Permanent Secretary U Tint Myint said they were "yet to rebuild infrastructure and draw up resettlement plans" to take back the refugees. He said Rakhine state leaders were handling the issue and it was "difficult to predict" when preparations would be complete. President's Office spokesperson U Zaw Htay said during the Dhaka visit of union minister for the State Counsellor's Office U Kyaw Tint Swe in

October, Bangladesh and Myanmar had discussed principals agreed by the two countries in 1993. Myanmar cabinet discussed a proposal made by Bangladesh at that time and forwarded the decision to State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. But there was no "final discussion" on the matter in Tuesday's meeting which mainly focused on cooperation, security and law enforcement issues. Myanmar's cross-border crime department's Brig Gen Aung Htay Myint said they "did not discuss plans for refugees." He said they discussed the repatriation "to verify and accept back those who have settled in Myanmar and fled to Bangladesh after violence." It is unclear how the verification process would work on the ground.



Refugees from Myanmar in the process of being resettled in South Korea. The majority of the refugees remain in camps in Thailand. Photo: EPA

## DESPITE POLITICAL THAW, REFUGEES IN THAILAND RELUCTANT TO RETURN HOME

By Susan Cunningham

**D**espite the political reforms since 2012 and the 2015 ceasefire, 98,000 Myanmar refugees living in nine border camps in Thailand display little readiness to return home, even as services are tapering off. "What we thought would be the triggers to return home have come and gone," said Sally Thompson, executive director of The Border Consortium. She spoke October 19 in Bangkok on a Foreign Correspondents of Thailand panel on Myanmar refugees. The Consortium is responsible for basic humanitarian services such as food, shelter and camp management to the nine camps along the border with Thailand. Refugees' reluctance stems from several causes, Thompson said. "They see ongoing skirmishes. They see the KNU [Karen National Union] demanding the withdrawal of troops [from the state]. There hasn't been any. In fact, there has been an increase. They want to see practical change on the ground. A ceasefire agreement is not peace. They ask, 'Who can guarantee my safety?'" Predominantly Karen (Kayah), camp residents also belong to the Kayin, Kachin, Mon, Burman, Pa-O, and Chin ethnic groups.

### No Thailand pressure

On a positive note, the Thai government is not exerting pressure to force the refugees to leave the country, Thompson said. Instead, it seems to be waiting for signs that the Myanmar government is encouraging residents to return to the homes that many left decades ago. So far, only 70 camp residents have undergone the lengthy process of repatriation by the

UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), which first requires registration, screening and authorization by the Myanmar government. Another 250 have been approved, but have been waiting for more than a year for the repatriation process. Publicity in Myanmar surrounding the 70 returnees last year may actually have discouraged others from applying for the formal UNHCR route. "They want to be as far away from Myanmar authorities as possible. They don't want to expose themselves to the authorities," Thompson said. "They think, 'What if the peace process collapses?'" Nonetheless, 14,000 residents in the past few years have returned to Myanmar on their own, without the assistance of the Refugee Agency and probably without documentation. Others weighing the decision to return permanently have made visits to homes in southeast Myanmar to evaluate local conditions and opportunities in access to medical care, education and information technology in the camps mean many are hesitant to return to villages and towns with little in the way of such services. That is especially true for the 50 percent of residents who are under age 19, most of whom have no memories or experiences of rural life and occupations.

### Shrinking budgets

Meanwhile, in the past decade the consortium's annual budget has shrunk by half, to \$17.5 million, even while the resident numbers declined by only 30 percent during the same period. Much of the drop in population has been due to refugee resettlements in third countries but camp inhabi-

tants can no longer apply for refugee status. The budget for the 26-year-old consortium is also precarious. Ninety-five percent of its funding consists of aid from eight donor governments, with the United States providing 70 percent of that total. With the exception of Canada, which provides multi-year funding, each government makes its allocation on a year by year basis. The consortium has responded to the cutbacks by prioritizing aid to the most vulnerable and reducing or eliminating rice rations to more self-sufficient households.

In addition to the consortium, an array of smaller NGOs provides medical services and development activities in the camps such as education and livelihood training. Although she did not have any figures, Thompson said funding for these NGOs has also been declining and some have left the camps altogether. If donors see their mission as development, they are now likely to consider Myanmar as a better base than temporary refugee camps, she said. Refugees need better incentives to return home to Myanmar. Right now, "there is no long-term strategy for development in the south-east," Thompson said. In addition to identification documents and security, that means home villages and towns in Kayah, Kayin and Mon states need drastic upgrades in services. "What is needed in southeast Myanmar? How can we scale up to when people go back, will they have a similar level of medical and educational services similar to what they had in their camps?"



Bangladesh Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, right, on a visit to Nay Pyi Taw. Photo: Mizzima